



Professor Cheryl de la Rey, vice-chancellor of the University of Canterbury, Image: Facebook

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**Explore new ways to restructure knowledge production**

Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher 22 September 2022

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As agents of social transformation, African universities should explore new ways of restructuring curricula, developing students and producing knowledge, according to South African academic Cheryl de la Rey, who is now the vice-chancellor of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

"I see African universities as a critical component of the transformation of African societies," she said.

"And I use that word 'transformation' in the broadest sense to encompass transforming knowledge; transforming identity; transforming or making an impact on systems of governance and how governance is conceived; and transforming individual lives, including through the ripple effect created by each graduate whom the universities educate."

In this context, De la Rey identifies a need to restructure curricula and university departments so that the graduates and knowledge produced by these higher education institutions may be more relevant to their national societies.

"African universities can and should push boundaries by rethinking the received wisdom on curricula and how these are structured," she said.

Citing the example of senior South African officials with doctorates who can appear unprepared for the career paths they have followed; she advocates the adoption of a "less traditional" kind of doctoral programme, "one in which the requirement for original thought and research is married to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that prepare the doctoral student for a non-academic career".

**Future Africa Institute**

De la Rey also advises that there should be a greater focus on introducing entrepreneurship at an earlier stage in the university system as an alternative to viewing the transition into work after graduation only in terms of organised employment opportunities.

In particular, she notes that "the goal of fostering transitions to livelihoods should be viewed as an aspect of universities' civic function – that is, their responsibility to educate and develop graduates who have a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility beyond themselves as individuals".

"This is particularly important, given the focus on the acquisition of material wealth at the individual level in African societies," she said.

De la Rey further proposes that universities should be more innovative in seeking to produce knowledge that is of greater relevance to Africa's development trajectory.

Citing her own former leading role at the Future Africa Institute at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, she describes how the body was conceptualised in response to "the traditional ways in which African universities are structured by department".

"It was conceived as a space for trans-disciplinary work, including at the doctoral level, where the intractable, so-called 'wicked' problems faced by Africa in its drive to achieve sustainable development could be addressed."

Beyond programmatic concerns, De la Rey emphasises the importance of re-framing the knowledge project at African universities.

"In relation to my own discipline of psychology, the knowledge space has framed African peoples as 'the other'; but now African universities have the opportunity to shift the power-dynamics of knowledges in their various manifestations," she said.

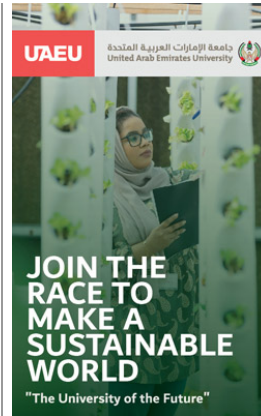
**Indigenous knowledge**

Concern for the kinds of knowledge being taught and produced has been a continuous theme in De la Rey's own career.

"As an academic, I was concerned from the outset with how the knowledge in my discipline was framed, including whose perspective was privileged in the knowledge that I learned as a student.

"Accordingly, I have reflected on my own responsibility as a scholar in seeking to shift those perspectives in the bodies of knowledge in which I have engaged."

De la Rey conceives the value of indigenous knowledge also in these terms.



"Indigenous knowledges present a range of perspectives on daily life and the world.

"For example, a Western conceptualisation of time frames as future-oriented and as a scarce resource that is always running out," she said. "But, another way of looking at time would be to think about the past and one's ancestry.

"In this sense, the topic of indigenous knowledge raises fundamental questions about how normative understandings of what constitutes knowledge are shaped and how knowledge, itself, is constituted."

In addition, the topic has played a part in framing the project of decolonisation at universities in Africa, she says, "promoting the idea that these institutions have a responsibility to nurture African intellectuals and to reflect on what the knowledge project means for the African university".

De la Rey further notes how the topic of indigenous knowledge has raised the issue of language of instruction as a fundamental aspect of identity; and how, in response, universities which are already facing budgetary shortfalls under austerity have been presented with a conundrum.

"The issue of languages often becomes a financial one for universities, with programmes getting cut if the numbers of those seeking to join them are too low," she said.

"However, this concern may be addressed by university leaderships through cross-subsidisation within an institution if it is large enough – and if it is not, through collaboration and cooperation with other universities, particularly if they are nearby."

#### Solidarity among universities

Indeed, De la Rey promotes the idea that solidarity among African universities offers an important mechanism for leveraging their capacity for transformation more broadly.

"Looking at African universities as a cohort, there appears to have been a growing commitment to collaboration and an understanding that they have the power to transform African societies," she said.

"Certainly, there has been a growth in networks among African universities, many of which have been effective."

De la Rey also identifies crises as offering important opportunities for universities to transform themselves in progressive ways.

"For example, the move to online teaching was sparked most recently by the lockdowns imposed in response to COVID-19 and also, a few years ago, by the nationwide student protests at universities in South Africa," she said.

"In this regard, there is a history of resilience and innovation in times of crisis across the African university system."

At the same time, while noting her own frustration at how slow to act universities can be, "except in moments of crisis", she also argues that "there is an institutional strength in continuity which has enabled universities to survive regime change, civil war, dictatorships and different political eras".

In this context, she cites the challenge of troubled relationships with national governments "which have affected the extent of [universities'] institutional autonomy, as well as the extent of the resources made available to them by the state".

For example, she said: "African academics who have been too critical have been sanctioned in a number of ways."

Accordingly, De la Rey advises that, "although agility is a virtue, it should not entail simply bending in the wind and abandoning the resilience that has helped universities to prevail despite changes in funding regimes and shifting global trends".

"Good universities are both responsive and enduring," she said.

*This article is based on an interview conducted by Professor Crain Soudien for 'The Imprint of Education' project, which is being implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. This project, which includes a series of critical engagements with experienced scholars and thought leaders on their reimaginings of higher education in Africa, investigates current and future challenges facing the sector, including best practices and innovations. Mark Paterson and Thierry M Luescher edited the transcript for focus and length.*

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